

STATEMENT OF
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Concerning
The Implementation of the National Fire Plan

Before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS, OVERSIGHT,
NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about the implementation of the National Fire Plan. I am Lyle Laverty, Associate Deputy Chief and National Fire Plan Coordinator of the Forest Service. I am here today to bring you up to date on what has been accomplished thus far and what we plan to do next.

The severe fire season of 2000 captured the attention of the American people on the need to find ways to protect life and property and minimize losses of natural resources. On September 8, the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior issued a report entitled, *“Managing the Impact of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment.”* The report, referred to as the National Fire Plan, contains recommendations to reduce the impacts of wildland fires on rural communities and ensure sufficient firefighting resources in the future.

Mr. Chairman, implementation of the National Fire Plan is well underway and significant progress has been made. However, we recognize that there are many challenges to complete the significantly increased workload. Long-term, it is going to take many years and a continued commitment in resources to effectively reduce the impacts of wildland fire on rural communities.

Even though it is early in the year, we have made a good start with the following:

- Treated over 80,000 acres, 713 miles of roads and 245 miles of trails to restore and rehabilitate areas damaged during the 2000 fire season.
- Reduced hazardous fuel on over 400,000 acres of the 1.8 million acres we plan to treat this year.

- Hired over 850 new permanent fire personnel and expect to have another 1900 (650 permanent, 1250 temporary) hired by April 30, 2001 along with planning to acquire 412 fire engines and the services of an additional 47 contracted helicopters to provide the highest practical level of fire fighting capability.
- Initiated assistance for training and equipment for 4000 volunteer fire departments.
- Published a preliminary list of communities at risk prepared by the States and Tribes to ensure that we increase the focus of our future efforts on reducing fire risk in the areas adjacent to these communities.
- Started 63 research projects to increase scientific knowledge in support of the National Fire Plan.
- Initiated discussions on a framework and draft of the national ten-year comprehensive strategy for the National Fire Plan.

Before I talk more about our accomplishments and our planned actions let me explain how conditions on our forests and rangelands developed the level of uncharacteristic fire risk that exists today.

BACKGROUND

Fire Conditions

Decades of excluding fire from our forests and past management practices have drastically changed the ecological condition of western forests and rangelands and dramatically affected fire behavior. A century ago, when low intensity, high frequency fires were commonplace, many forests were less dense and had larger, more fire-resistant trees. Over time, the composition of our forests has changed from more fire-resistant tree species to species non-resistant to fire such as grand fir, Douglas-fir, and subalpine fir.

Fire ecologists point out the paradox of fire suppression: the more effective we become at fire suppression, the more fuels accumulate and ultimately create conditions for the occurrence of more intense fires. As it became Federal practice to extinguish fires aggressively in the west, firefighting budgets rose dramatically and firefighting tactics and equipment became increasingly more sophisticated and effective. In the early 1930s the annual acreage burned by wildfires in the lower 48 states was about 40 million acres a year. In the 1970s because of our effective fire suppression the annual acreage burned by wildfires in the lower 48 states dropped to about five million acres. In the 1990's, the annual average acreage burned by wildfires was less than 4 million acres.

In addition to changes in tree species and ecological conditions of forests and grasslands more communities are at risk of wildfire than in earlier years. During the last two decades dramatic increases in the population in the West has resulted in housing developments in fire-prone areas, often adjacent to Federal land. This area where human development meets or intermingles with undeveloped wildland is called the "wildland-urban interface."

Reversing the effects of a century of aggressive fire suppression and past management practices will take time and money targeted to high priority areas to protect people, communities, readily accessible municipal watersheds, and habitat for threatened and endangered species. Although not all areas will need to be treated, the Forest Service and the General Accounting Office have

estimated that there are around 60 million acres at risk of uncharacteristic wildfire in the interior West and more than 72 million acres nationwide. Many of these acres are not in the wildland-urban interface and include acres distant from habitation.

The Forest Service and its interagency partners have increased their efforts to reduce risks associated with the buildup of brush, shrubs, small trees and other fuels in forest and rangelands through a variety of approaches, including controlled burns, the physical removal of undergrowth, and the prevention and eradication of invasive plants. In 1994 the Forest Service treated approximately 385,000 acres across the United States to reduce hazardous fuels. In 2000 we treated over 750,000 acres almost double our earlier efforts.

Addressing Fire Conditions: The Key Points of the National Fire Plan

To address these changed conditions the recommendations in “*Managing the Impact of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment*” and actions implementing the National Fire Plan focus on five key points:

- Firefighting. Be adequately prepared to fight wildland fire.
- Rehabilitation and Restoration. Restore landscapes and rebuild communities damaged by the wildfires of 2000.
- Hazardous Fuel Reduction. Invest in projects to reduce fire risk.
- Community Assistance. Work directly with communities to ensure adequate protection.
- Accountability. Be accountable and establish adequate oversight, coordination, program development, and monitoring for performance.

The report also recommended substantial increases in funding for the land management agencies to address the five key points.

In response to the recommendations in the Report, Congress and the Administration increased funding for agency firefighting, fuels reduction, and other fire-related programs. We appreciate the quick and decisive actions of Congress and the Administration to fully fund the fire budgets for both the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior. (See Appendix A.)

The Conference Report for P.L. 106-291 contains explicit direction for the implementation of the National Fire Plan. The Appropriations conferees directed the agencies to work closely with State and local communities to maximize benefits to the environment and to local communities. They directed the agencies to seek the advice of the State Governors and local and tribal government representatives in setting priorities for fuels treatments, burned area rehabilitation and public outreach and education. The Appropriations conferees also directed the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture to work together to formulate complementary budget requests and to carry out the other tasks, including developing criteria for rehabilitation projects, developing a list of all communities within the vicinity of Federal lands at high risk from fire, and working collaboratively with the State Governors to develop a 10-year comprehensive strategy. (See Appendix B.)

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE NATIONAL FIRE PLAN

Implementation of the National Fire Plan is well underway. Since the very beginning we have worked collaboratively with Department of the Interior agencies, the Governors, State Foresters, tribal governments and county officials.

Our implementation efforts focus on addressing the five key points of the National Fire Plan. The status of our actions include the following:

Firefighting Readiness We are focusing on increasing firefighting capability and capacity for initial attack, extended attack, and large fire support. We believe our efforts will keep a number of small fires from becoming large, better protect natural resources, reduce threat to adjacent communities, and reduce the cost of large fire suppression.

The expanded capacity will be used in a manner consistent with our knowledge and experience of the causes of fire risks. The agency will be guided by fire management plans that we intend to have updated and completed by the end of 2001.

To date the Forest Service has hired over 850 new permanent fire personnel and plan to hire a total of over 2,750 (1500 permanent, 1250 temporary) to provide the highest practical level of protection efficiency. This will include twelve new hotshot crews for a national total of 74 crews. We plan to acquire an additional 412 fire engines and have contracts for an additional 47 helicopters for a total of 106 helicopters and 40 fixed-wing aircraft. In addition we will have another 500 aircraft available through "call when needed" contracts. We are also in the process of awarding the retardant contract for 2001-2003 to ensure adequate supplies.

In addition, we will construct several new fire facilities and increase the level of maintenance on existing fire facilities to support initial attack. This construction includes projects such as a new airtanker base and national fire cache in Silver City, New Mexico, new hotshot crew housing in Ft. Collins, Colorado, and a new helitack base in Price Valley, Idaho.

The agency is also investing in applied research to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and safety of the national firefighting effort. In addition to the progress made in the Forest Service research and development program, the Joint Fire Science Program (JFSP) has been increased. This additional applied research and development will assess fire behavior and fire restoration techniques during and immediately after fire events; upgrade aircraft-based tools for monitoring fire behavior; increase understanding about post-fire conditions, fire effects, and the effectiveness of past land management treatments; and establish protocols for evaluating rehabilitation measures. The Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior have also established a stakeholder advisory committee to advise the JFSP Governing Board. The committee plans to hold its first meeting in April.

Rehabilitation and Restoration We are focusing rehabilitation efforts on restoring watershed function, including protection of basic soil, water resources, biological communities, and prevention of invasive species in priority watersheds. Healthy, diverse ecosystems are resilient and less likely to produce uncharacteristically intense fires when they burn.

Burned area emergency rehabilitation (BAER) teams mobilized after the 2000 fire season. Plans were developed and approved for over \$40.8 million of emergency stabilization for 235 projects on moderately and severely burned National Forest System lands. Most of the emergency treatments were completed before winter, including 62,000 acres of grass seeding, 3,606 acres of mulching, 17,886 acres of intensive log and wattle erosion barriers, and drainage improvements on 713 miles of roads and 245 miles of trail. For example:

- In Idaho, 650 acres were seeded, 242 acres intensively mulched, and erosion control barriers installed on 3,157 acres on the Trail Creek fire on the Boise NF.
- In Montana, drainage was improved on 410 miles of road and 4,732 acres of intensive erosion control barriers were installed on the Skalkaho-Valley fire on the Bitterroot NF.
- In California, 890 acres were seeded and 200 acres intensively mulched on the Manter fire on the Sequoia NF.
- In New Mexico, 13,500 acres were seeded, 3,070 acres intensively mulched, and 5,170 acres of erosion control barriers installed for the Cerro Grande fire on the Santa Fe NF.
- In Colorado, 1,000 acres of mulch and erosion barriers are being installed on the Bobcat burn.

The remaining acres will be treated as soon as the land is accessible this spring.

In addition, long-term rehabilitation and restoration on over 400 projects is currently underway. These activities will include reforestation, replacement or repair of minor facilities, treatment of invasive species (including noxious weeds) resulting from fire, survey and monitor impacts to wilderness, survey and rehabilitate impacted heritage resources, reconstruct fencing, restore critical habitat and restore impacted trails.

We are also conducting additional research in rehabilitation and restoration methods. One example is research at Rocky Mountain Research Station quantifying the soil and water quality consequences of catastrophic fire, using the Cerro Grande and other southwestern fires as study sites.

Hazardous Fuel Reduction We are focusing hazardous fuels reduction projects in communities at risk, readily accessible municipal watersheds, threatened and endangered species habitat, and other important local areas, where conditions favor uncharacteristically intense fires. We will remove excessive vegetation and dead fuels through thinning, prescribed fire, and other treatment methods.

Following Congressional direction we asked State, local and tribal governments, and interested parties to identify urban wildland interface communities within the vicinity of Federal lands that are at high risk from wildfire. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior published a preliminary list in the *Federal Register* on January 4, 2001. The States and Tribes each developed criteria for selecting communities that resulted in some States listing numerous communities and others listing only a few. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior have

asked the Governors and the National Association of State Foresters to help the Federal Agencies to work with Tribes, States, local governments, and other interested parties to develop a national list based on uniform criteria.

We have completed hazardous fuel reduction on over 400,000 acres of the 1.8 million acres that are planned for treatment this fiscal year. Many of these projects focus on wildland-urban interface areas. In the future, we intend to focus the majority of this work on wildland-urban interface areas where hazardous fuel conditions exist near communities.

In addition to work on Federal lands, we will also provide technical and financial support to State and local fire departments to implement 329 projects to improve conditions on wildland-urban interface areas on non-federal lands. The States will also be implementing projects in impacted areas using the Community and Private Land Fire Assistance funding.

Research is also focusing on hazardous fuels projects. An example is work to characterize and map vegetation and fuels from remote sensed data to locate urban interface areas exposed to high fire potential. These methods will be helpful in prioritizing investments in fuels treatment.

Our success in accomplishing hazardous fuel reduction objectives will be largely dependent on focusing our treatments in the areas of greatest need. Our goal is to do this efficiently and with the least amount of controversy, getting the most amount of high-priority work done. Protecting communities and restoring forests represents the sort of win-win solution that will allow us to build a strong constituency for ecologically sensible active management.

Community Assistance We are assisting State and local partners by providing funding assistance to rural and volunteer fire departments and through programs such as FIREWISE to educate homeowners to take actions to reduce fire risk to homes and private property. We plan to expand community assistance to rural volunteer fire departments to increase local firefighting capacity. Rural and volunteer fire departments provide the front line of defense, or initial attack, for up to 90 percent of communities. Strong readiness capability at the State and local levels goes hand-in-hand with optimal efficiency at the Federal level. We will increase our assistance for training and equipment to 4,000 volunteer fire departments in high-risk areas.

The Forest Service has been working with the State and private landowners, the National Fire Protection Association, and local firefighting organizations to help ensure that home protection capabilities are improved and to educate homeowners in fire-sensitive ecosystems about the consequences of wildfires. Also homeowners are being taught techniques in community planning, homebuilding, and landscaping to protect themselves and their property. Efforts include FIREWISE and other high priority prevention and mitigation education programs, as well as fuels reduction, defensible space development, and community hazard mitigation on non-federal lands.

We expect implementation of the National Fire Plan can create over 8,000 new jobs in rural areas and provide economic opportunities for rural forest dependent communities.

We are also beginning research to test the effectiveness of different models of collaboration, education, and community actions and to compare different local regulatory and incentive-based policies for encouraging residents to adopt FIREWISE practices. These new efforts will provide

useful insights and guidelines for implementing effective community – level programs for wildfire protection.

Accountability The agency is working to establish adequate oversight, coordination, program development, and monitoring for National Fire Plan performance to ensure accountability.

A key component in ensuring accountability is tracking funding and accomplishments. In keeping with Congressional reporting requirements, the Forest Service is finalizing a database to track projects funded by Title IV funds. It will include project accomplishments and funding for work in hazardous fuels reduction, rehabilitation, and community assistance. Once it is fully operational – which is planned for the end of this month – we will be able to report, for example, numbers and types of rehabilitation work being done in a particular national forest, congressional district, or state.

Of course, the Forest Service must be accountable for all funding. In fiscal year 2000, obligations in the Wildland Fire Management Appropriation totaled \$1.5 billion, exceeding available funds by \$274 million. An anti-deficiency report was sent to President Clinton and members of Congress as required by law. This violation was caused by delays in entering suppression costs into the agency financial system. The agency is conducting an intensive Anti-Deficiency Act violation review to more fully determine the specific causes and implement procedures to prevent a reoccurrence.

Another recent development associated with the implementation of the National Fire Plan is the *“Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.”* The Review and Update was completed in January 2001 in response to a request from the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior. The working team concluded that the 1995 Federal Fire Policy is generally sound, but that some changes and additions are needed to address issues such as fire planning, program management and oversight, and program evaluation.

If you refer to the list of Reporting Requirements in Appendix B, you will see the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have accomplished several other important tasks and reported to Congress in a timely manner. These include a report on criteria for rehabilitation projects; a report on the need for revised or expedited environmental compliance procedures; and a financial plan and an action plan showing how agencies will spend the emergency funds.

Next Steps

The following are the next immediate actions to be taken by the Forest Service to continue implementation of the National Fire Plan:

- Complete the fuels management projects underway and continue planning for 2002 focusing fuels treatments in urban interface communities where they are most likely to reduce risk effectively.
- Continue work on a long-term strategy for the National Fire Plan (2002-2010) in collaboration with Governors and other stakeholders.

- Complete the hiring of new fire personnel to produce an extremely high level of firefighting capability.
- Complete analysis of fire risk and integrate with other resource information to prioritize treatment areas.

We will continue to provide timely information to Congress and other interested parties about the National Fire Plan.

Summary

Mr. Chairman, my staff and I will continue to work closely with the Department of the Interior Team to work with communities to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems and to minimize the losses from future wildfires on National Forest System lands, other Federal, State, Tribal, and privately-owned lands. Our successes to date – beginning to define the wildland-urban interface communities, hiring firefighters for the 2001 fire season, and ongoing rehabilitation, restoration, FIREWISE education work – is evidence of the strong start. However, our continued success will depend on what happens this field season.

We are committed to increasing the Nation's firefighting capability and ability to protect communities and restore resources, but it will take longer than one year.

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the Members of the Subcommittee might have.

**Appendix A. National Fire Plan Funding, USDA Forest Service
FY 2001 Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, P.L. 106-291**

Programs	Amount	Description of Activities to be Accomplished
Title II Preparedness and Firefighting		
Fire Preparedness:	174,761,000	Bring fire readiness up to optimal level of efficiency.
Fire Workforce Development and Maintenance	16,963,000	Develop and maintain adequate workforce for fire management.
New Technology Development, including the JFSP	15,965,000	Develop new fire management technology and emphasize the continued implementation of the Joint Fire Science Program.
Subtotal, Preparedness	207,689,000	
Emergency Fire Contingency	275,393,000	Provide necessary funds for fire suppression activities and restore unmet FY 2000 expenditures.
Subtotal, Title II	483,082,000	
Title IV Emergency Contingency Funds		
Suppression	178,606,000	Provide necessary funds for fire suppression activities.
Hazardous Fuel Reduction:	88,280,000	Reduce hazardous fuel accumulation on 1.8 million acres in high-risk areas, primarily on Federal lands.
Analysis, monitoring, and planning for NEPA	11,500,000	Conduct planning, analysis, and monitoring for National Environmental Policy Act requirements.
Community Forestry Restoration in New Mexico	4,989,000	
Quincy Library Group	14,967,000	Implement the Quincy Library Group Plan.
Subtotal, Hazardous Fuel Reduction	119,736,000	
Cooperative Programs:		
Cooperative Fire Protection:		
State Fire Assistance:		
Preparedness	10,832,000	Improve state fire readiness to complement Federal capability.
Firewise	3,200,000	Provide fire prevention education to improve community and homeowner readiness to prepare for wildland fires.
Hazard Mitigation and Prevention	28,868,000	Reduce hazardous fuel accumulation on 395,000 acres in high-risk areas and develop defensible space for improved fire protection.
Kenai Peninsula Borough	7,483,000	Improve forest health and fire protection capability as outlined in the spruce bark beetle task force action plan.
Subtotal, State Fire Assistance	50,383,000	
Volunteer Fire Assistance	8,262,000	Equip and train 4,000 rural volunteer fire departments to improve the fire protection readiness capability of local communities.
Subtotal, Cooperative Fire Protection	58,645,000	
Forest Health Management (invasive species)	11,974,000	Reduce the spread of invasive species due to fires.
Economic Action Programs	12,472,000	Expand and develop markets for woods products resulting from fuel removal.
Community and Private Land Fire Assistance:		
Fence Reconstruction	8,980,000	Reconstruct fire damaged fences in the Western States.
Hazard Mitigation	5,987,000	Reduce hazardous fuel accumulation in high-risk areas and develop defensible space for improved fire protection.
Multi-resource Stewardship Planning	6,985,000	Enhance multi-resource stewardship planning to ensure effective fire protection treatments in the wildland-urban interface.
Economic Action Programs Pilot Projects	7,982,000	Initiate pilot projects for improved utilization of removed fuel, including biomass conversion.
Community Planning for Fire Protection	4,989,000	Support community planning to develop and maintain protection capabilities in high-risk areas in the wildland-urban interface.
Subtotal, Community and Private Land Fire Assistance:	34,923,000	
Subtotal, Cooperative Programs	118,014,000	
Rehabilitation and Restoration	141,688,000	Restore and rehabilitate burned areas.
Research and Development	15,965,000	Conduct research on fuels management treatments and their effects on fire behavior and damage.
Facilities:		
Reconstruction and Repair of Air Tanker Bases	11,973,000	Reconstruct and repair of air tanker bases.
Reconstruction and Repair of Fire Facilities	31,930,000	Reconstruct and repair of fire facilities.
Subtotal, Facilities	43,903,000	
Subtotal, Title IV	617,912,000	
Total	\$1,100,994,000	

Appendix B. Congressional Reporting Requirements

Date	Department Agency	Congressional Reporting Requirements	Product	Status
11/13/00	USFS	Within 30 days publish FS Cohesive Strategy in Federal Register	Publish Cohesive Strategy	Complete 11/09/00
12/01/00	DoI/USDA	Report to the Appropriations Committee on criteria for rehabilitation projects to be funded from this appropriation	Report on Rehabilitation Project Criteria	Complete 11/29/00
12/11/00	DoI/USDA/CEQ	Evaluate the need for revised or expedited environmental compliance procedures including preparation of documentation required by NEPA	Report on Compliance with Laws Requiring Clearance	Complete 12/11/00
12/11/00	DoI/USDA	Publish, within 60 days, a list of all communities within the vicinity of Federal lands that are at "high risk" from wildfire, including communities around which treatments are on-going; and around which the Secretaries are preparing to begin treatments in 2001	Listing of Communities in high-risk areas	Complete; 1/04/01
12/31/00	DoI/USDA	The managers are concerned that nearly three years have passed without establishment of the Stakeholder Advisory Group, a group of technical experts to advise the Joint Fire Science Program Governing Board. The managers direct the Secretaries to establish the group.	Establish Science Stakeholder Advisory Committee. (FACA approval needed)	Complete 1/18/01
01/01/01	DoI/USDA	Prior to issuance of the record of decision for the Interior Columbia River Basin Ecosystem Management Project, report to Congress on: the fire's effects on the project area, and the significance of the President's fire report on the project area (Gen. Provision #332).	ICBEMP Fire Report	Underway
01/09/01	DoI/USDA	Within 90 days, deliver a financial plan showing how the agencies intend to spend all of the funds included under Title IV.	Financial Plan	Complete 1/19/01
01/09/01	DoI/USDA	Within 90 days deliver an action plan describing proposed accomplishments by funding; estimates of the number of personnel to be hired; description of equipment to be purchased and/or leased; description of services to be contracted; description of research projects funded by unit; estimate of acres to be treated by treatment type; estimate of treatments in the WUI; and, the estimate of rural communities assisted by state.	Action Plan	Complete 1/19/01
02/01/01	DoI/USDA	Show planned and actual funding and accomplishments for stabilization and rehabilitation activities in the 2002 budget request.	2002 Budget Justification	Underway
05/01/01	DoI/USDA	Publish in the Fed. Reg. A list of all communities at "high risk" from wildfire for which treatments will not have been implemented during 2001; identify reason why; and, recommend any additional fund or authority needs.	Report to Congress on High Risk Communities; Impediments to Success	Underway
05/01/01	DoI/USDA	Secretaries are to engage Governors in a collaborative structure to cooperatively develop a coordinated, national 10-year comprehensive strategy. States are to be full partners in the planning, decision-making and implementation of the plan.	Collaborative structure, strategy with states	Underway
12/31/01	DoI/USDA	With 90 days following the end of FY01, provide a report on: an update financial report showing final expenditures; an updated action report showing final accomplishments	Performance Report	To be completed

